

The agency of things (that no longer exist): memories of urbicidal violence as articulated in the works of France- and UK-based Iraqi and Syrian artists

Art and post-violence memory politics have recently been widely debated. The intersections of aesthetics and politics in the context of traumatic experiences and their memorialization in culture have attracted interest of human rights scholars. This is also due to the fact, that the links between artistic activities, memory, and political activism have been lately consolidating, giving impetus to new forms of political and cultural interventions. Little attention, however, has been in this context paid to the difficult legacies of urban destruction and forced relocation as tackled within the artistic practice, even though in the post-Cold War era, the violence against the built environment (or urbicide) has structured the geographies of many war-torn areas. This project pays attention to these recent legacies, looking on how they have been experienced and coped with by representatives of the affected communities.

The objective of the project is to investigate the memory-work related to experiences of urbicidal violence articulated via initiatives of Syrian and Iraqi artists based in France and the UK. Since the geographies of displacement and intentional destruction continue to structure socio-political relations in Iraq and Syria, the diaspora artists reconsider the meaning and importance of a physical place (and its erasure) for community-sustaining processes, encouraging new forms of political witnessing. A place, however, cannot be understood solely as a physical site. Rather, it must be seen as a complex combination of symbolic and material agents and forces, which operate far beyond an immediate physical location. The artists reevaluate, through artistic means, the meanings of the “right to the city” (a concept developed by Henri Lefebvre in 1968) and how this can be exerted in the conditions of erasure or devastation of a place, followed by forced displacement. Given the fragile entanglements of places, rights, citizenship, urban space, community, and memory politics, this project adds a new perspective to the scholarship on responses to political violence in general, and the destruction of the built environment in particular. Since the situation in Iraq and Syria is unstable, it is necessary to design new research strategies to understand these vulnerable contexts. This project undertakes such an attempt.

The project assumes that the artistic practice of the UK and France-based Syrian and Iraqi artists exposes the fact, that people experience memory in spatial, often place-based, manners. Therefore, this research reveals the absolutely crucial role of the place for community-building processes, regardless of whether this place is real or imagined. Drawing on the concept of agency of things (that no longer exist), this study exposes the entwinement of political agendas and cultural production. It proposes a transdisciplinary approach bridging the cultural studies of art and political science. In line with current tendencies in cultural studies of politics to focus on war as practice and experience, it aims to reveal how the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria are lived through and remembered in the diasporic circumstances. This consists of an analysis of political issues (the legacy of political violence) through research strategies stemming from cultural studies of art and activism, and with employment of theories and concepts originating within the field of memory studies.

In methodological terms, the project takes a new materialist perspective, which acknowledges the material-semiotic dimension of destruction. As such, it triggers reflection on the ways humans encounter, are affected by, respond to, destroy, relay upon, and are generally imbricated with matter. It also explores the agency of things, or how they affect us, and how this agency is entangled with, co-constituted by, and co-constitutive of cultural production (such as artistic practice). A new materialist approach to art acknowledges that the experience of art consists in the entanglement of matter and meaning. Not only does such an account of art revalue art’s material dimension, but it also underlines its generative qualities. Such an understanding will guide this study in the examination of the material-semiotic process of emergence of the work of art, the entanglement of the artistic process and the lived experience of the artist/activist, as well as the study of the reception of the work of art by local audiences. This double conceptual move connected to the new materialist orientation of the project: the agency of things that no longer exist (lost houses, cities, communities, objects) and the rendition of art in agential terms (the work of art) testifies to the innovative methodological nature of this research. Operationally, the project makes use of archival research, semi-structured interviews, (digital) ethnographies, new materialist art analysis, and self-reflexive auto-ethnography.